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AUTHOR Gibson, Sharon S.
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ABSTRACT

Writing teachers should draw on their own use of collaborative techniques in attempting to develop similar support systems within the writing classrooms and in the larger university community. Teacher awareness of the problems that faced them in their past attempts at collaboration should inform them concerning their propensity to oversimplify the collaborative process. The opposing forces of language and group process are the forces that make working together a creative activity. The tensions of language and group work might be termed a "dialectics of discourse" because areas of disagreement are essentially areas of new knowledge. The forces of dissensus--the areas of disagreement, confusion, questions and objections--are more productive and creative than consensus in group discourse settings. Language itself consists of opposing forces; likewise, there are vast differences between individual and communal meanings. Any classroom, furthermore, is composed of a wide range of contexts and backgrounds as experienced by participants. Students, like professional scholars, belong to many different overlapping and often conflicting communities. In short, a true representation of a dialectics of discourse must presume that it is without beginning or end and all language and community forces are constantly interacting. Committees, for example, often produce their most dazzling results when faced with the most dissensus and conflict. True collaborative work, if it is to be fruitful, is always messy and full of conflict. (Two figures illustrating graphically the concept of a "dialectics of discourse" are attached.) (HB)

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FACULTY AND STUDENT COMMUNITIES: THE INTERACTIVE CONTEXTS OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

Sharon S. Gibson

Towson State University

Teaching is not a solitary profession. As teachers of writing, we interact with our colleagues in the English Department, with other faculty at our institution, and with peers at other institutions through conferences like this one and publications like *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Rhetoric Review*. Through these various avenues of interaction, we map out strategies for improving our teaching, developing our professional scholarship, and bettering our service to our institutions and our larger communities--we become stronger both personally and professionally. Just as we have developed this system of support and interaction--of collaboration--with our peers in person, or through reading, with our disciplinary community of composition teachers and researchers, we can help our students develop support systems within our writing classrooms and in the larger university community. When we work together as faculty, we use some of the same collaborative techniques we encourage our students to try in the classroom. Thus, we can use our own experience with collaboration to help us apply the current composition philosophy of community-based knowledge

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to our own pedagogy, and thereby to reinforce our students' individual learning.

The very challenges, affirmations, and problems we encounter in working with our peers exist for our students as well. By drawing upon our own experiences with mutual support and cooperative sharing, we can encourage a support system for our students so that they are no longer struggling individually with their writing, with their reading, or with their classroom interactions. Even our more challenging interactions can offer insights into the process of community knowledge-making. When our group has difficulty agreeing and reaching consensus, or our committee struggles just understanding the group objectives from one another's perspective, we are learning valuable tools for teaching our students to negotiate difference.

As we teachers become more aware of our own collaborative processes, particularly of the opposing forces of group processes and even of language itself, we become better facilitators of collaboration and learning in our classrooms. Too often, we over-simplify collaboration in our own thinking or in our directions to our students. We tend to think of collaboration and of community knowledge-making as a cooperative and consensus-building activity lacking in tension or misdirection. If we but appraise our own experiences with collaboration honestly, we instantly become aware of all the miscommunications and misunderstandings, the false starts and negative reactions,

the confusion and disagreements that are part of all true collaborative efforts.

Today I want to explore the opposing forces of language and group processes because these are the forces which make working together a creative activity. These areas of tension and difference--things like the conflict between individual knowledge and experience versus the group experience (the objective and subjective aspects of language)--lead to our making new knowledge precisely because they **force** us to stretch our boundaries, allowing for growth and learning. Thus, I call the tensions of language and group work the "dialectics of discourse" because the areas of disagreement and confusion in our group discussions--whether they be among peers in a classroom or among professionals through the extended conversations of journal publication and response--are the areas of new knowledge, new knowledge for ourselves and perhaps for our communities as well.

Most groups try to reach consensus. Our goal as teachers is often to convert our students to the academic consensus of our discipline, or to get class members to reinforce one another by agreeing. But consensus is static; it goes nowhere; it reinforces the status quo.

The opposing dissensus forces--the areas of disagreement and confusion, the different approaches to problems or the problems which cannot be solved by our habitual approach, and the individuals who think differently

from the other members of the group, who raise questions or objections: these are the forces which make working together creative. Encouraging dissensus in the classroom helps students think and write more creatively, more committedly, and more convincingly. And, it more nearly models the kinds of consensus/dissensus experiences we and they experience in the world outside our writing classrooms.

Because so many writers in our field over-simplify and reduce the complexities of writing and learning and community, I want to take a little more time this morning to explore the dialectics of discourse. Just what are these opposing forces and where do they originate?

First, there are the opposing forces inherent in language itself. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, M. M. Bakhtin observes:

> At any given moment of its evolution, language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects . . . but also into languages that are socioideological: languages of social groups, "professional" and "generic" languages, languages of generations and so forth. . . . Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization go forward. Language is a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language.

Thus, Bakhtin identifies the dialectics and the tensions of language itself.

The differences between Bakhtin's centripetal and centrifugal forces in language go beyond the words themselves to the various communities to which these words belong. First, there are the dialectics between individual and community meaning. As I. A. Richards and Susanne Langer remind us, all words have both social or conceptual meanings and the idiosyncratic associations of our individual experiences with the concepts for which the words are merely signs. Like George Butterworth, they argue that "the individual is the particularizing force in the acquisition of knowledge; he (or she) produces new ideas, sometimes on the basis of generalizations already available in society."

Butterworth reminds us that while it would be difficult to trace our physical heredity back to Aristotle, our social lineage from Aristotle's thinking is easily observed. Nonetheless, he says, the transmission of knowledge held by society depends upon cognitive growth, upon learning, in the individual. So, there is also a difference, a tension or dialectic, between the complementary forces of individual and group knowledge.

Butterworth cites studies in cognitive psychology which demonstrate that "cognitive conflict between individuals will generate cognitive growth." While these studies do not rule out the possibility of an individual working through

conflicting viewpoints in isolation and learning through what psychologists call "intramental" conflict, Butterworth argues that "collective" conflict is more effective in inducing learning. These beliefs are echoed by composition theorist Lester Faigley and his co-researchers in their 1985 book, *Assessing Writers' Knowledge and Processes of Composing*. They note the healthy dialectics, even tensions, we experience in the ideal writing classroom:

> Classrooms are processes--dynamic entities that affect and are affected by such surrounding contexts as the curriculum for their content area, the program and the curricula for the rest of the school, college, or university, and the society at large. More important, classrooms are discourse communities and extensions of discourse communities. . . . Learning to write in the classroom involves interactions among teachers and writers, among textbooks and writers, among writers and writers, among writers and their own and others' texts, and among writers and texts and the culture at large.

Just as out students' learning and writing requires the interactions of all these different community and individual contexts generated by the class itself, they and we bring many other contexts to this classroom. As instructors, we bring many other communities to the collaborative conversation in our writing classroom. Our own and our

various students' overlapping communities create another class of tensions affecting collaboration.

To imagine how complicated all this, think of the overlapping communities which evolve from the mere fact that you are a teacher: As Tony Becher notes in "The Disciplinary Shaping of the Profession," "To affiliate with a particular specialism is to become, except in a few heavily populated areas, a member of a relatively small and close-knit community." Becher suggests that while our disciplinary community may number in the hundreds, those to whom we turn for professional advice and conversation will be a relatively small group of colleagues: between 6 and 12 individuals. But we are also part of department, college, and university faculties or high school, district, and state faculties as well as members of those larger social and cultural communities associated with neighborhoods, religion, various interests and hobbies, etc.

Likewise, our students each belong to many different overlapping and sometimes conflicting communities outside our classrooms. Rather than naively expecting to create model communities of like creatures within our classrooms, we need to recognize and celebrate these differences, for it is these differences on which our students will draw for their learning and--perhaps even more importantly--for their individual contributions to group knowledge and thus, for their authority to speak, to author their texts.

Figure one--which my daughter affectionately calls "the pretzel"--illustrates the complex interactions of all these conflicting forces of language and communities. It represents the Dialectics of Discourse. Like the M.C. Escher illustration on which it is based, this model suggests that all these language and community forces constantly interact. Like the "pretzel," the dialectics of discourse are without beginning or end. My diagram also suggests that our own--or our students'--writing adds yet another dimension--that of public versus private discourse--over the other dialectics of language, knowledge, and community. If we accept this model, we accept the overwhelming complexity of the writing process as well as the complexity of interactions between community knowledge-making and individual learning in collaborative work.

These complex interactions are difficult to picture in the abstract, but I offer another figure to help you fit your own experience into this model.

If you will just recall for a moment the last committee on which you served. Think about the effort it took to reach agreement about a course of action, and if that course of action required some sort of written communication, think about the effort required to reach consensus about the language and syntax of that communication, even after purported agreement . Recall as well, how one person's idea was taken up, changed, modified, expanded, by group discussion. With these recollections, you will be aware,

first-hand, of both the knowledge-making qualities and the tensions inherent in collaborative efforts.

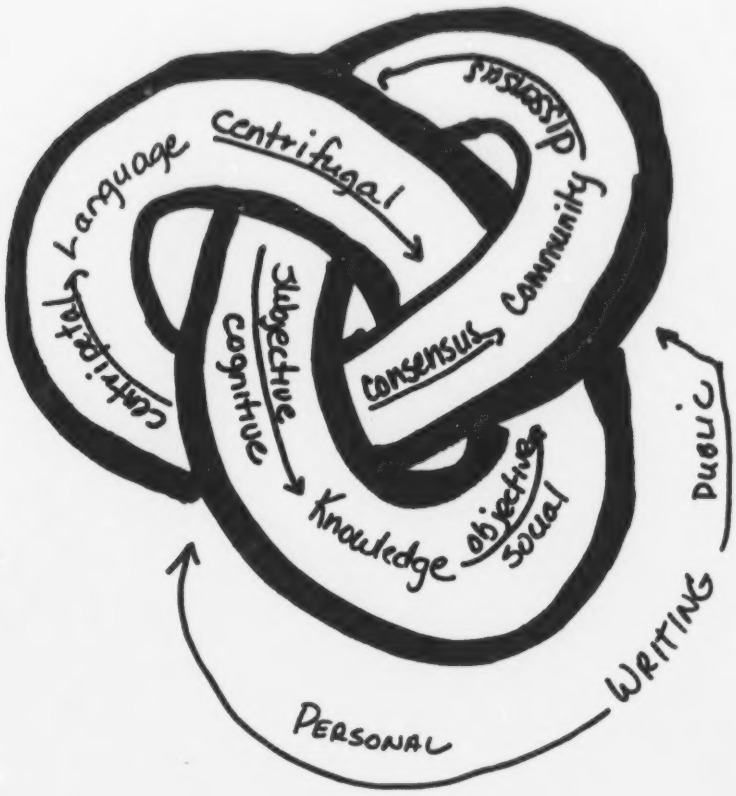
Figure two--"the donut"--is my unskilled attempt to create a visual model of community-knowledge theory drawn from my own experience in collaborative efforts. I have tried to identify general forces which have been present in most of these experiences and the ways these forces have worked. You should be able to fit the memory I just asked you to recall into this model. For example, a few years ago, I worked with a group of fellow English faculty to plan a workshop. Using John Trimbur's definitions of the terms "consensus" and "dissensus" as labels to mark the conceptual dimensions of the opposing forces at work in our committee meetings, I was able to understand that our disagreements, not our agreements, led us forward. Dissensus is generative despite the discomfort and tensions conflicts sometimes cause. Of course, there are limits to a group's tolerance for disagreement; there must be a strong motivation to keep working past these initial disagreements and discomforts. For example, in my faculty planning group it was our community ties that kept us working together. As our individual goals and experiences pulled us away from reaching consensus, our shared task, our shared values and communities--the fact that we must work together as members of the same department after the specific task had been completed--helped us continue to work together positively.

But if the tensions, the dissensus forces had not existed, we would have settled for the first ideas, losing the opportunity to learn and grow and to create a more ground-breaking and effective workshop. In fact, I confess that my own new knowledge included the concept for the "donut" model of Knowledge and Community Processes now before you.

Now, consider, if you will, that in our classrooms, students do not begin with the same established community my group or you and your committee had. Students come to our classroom as the random choice of the registrar's computer. They come with varying degrees of motivation and skill and from many different cultural and familial backgrounds. As teachers, we must help students establish a feeling of community if we wish to encourage collaboration and discussion. But, if we want their work together to model real community consensus and dissensus processes, we need to draw upon a self-reflexive appraisal of our own collaborative experiences. We would then want to encourage our students to challenge not only one another, but also the authority of the texts they read, and perhaps even our own authority as experts. We need to help them work together to build new ideas and knowledge by exploring differences and tensions as well as agreements, by exploring dissensus as well as consensus. We need to help them negotiate the fine marginal areas between growth and chaos, and between mutual support and encouragement and being stuck in the status quo.

True collaborative work is always messy and full of conflict, (however hidden beneath the surface) but since this hidden conflict is always present in the acquisition of new knowledge, would we want it to be any other way?

Dialectics of Discourse



"Teacher" Role

1. self (incl. other communities)
2. individual professional interests
3. subgroups of faculty ie workshop panel
4. department faculty
5. university (locals)
   discipline (cosmopolitans)
6. larger culture

"Student" Role

1. self (incl. other communi
2. individual course goals
3. subgroups of class
4. class & teacher commun
5. university
   professional goals
6. larger culture

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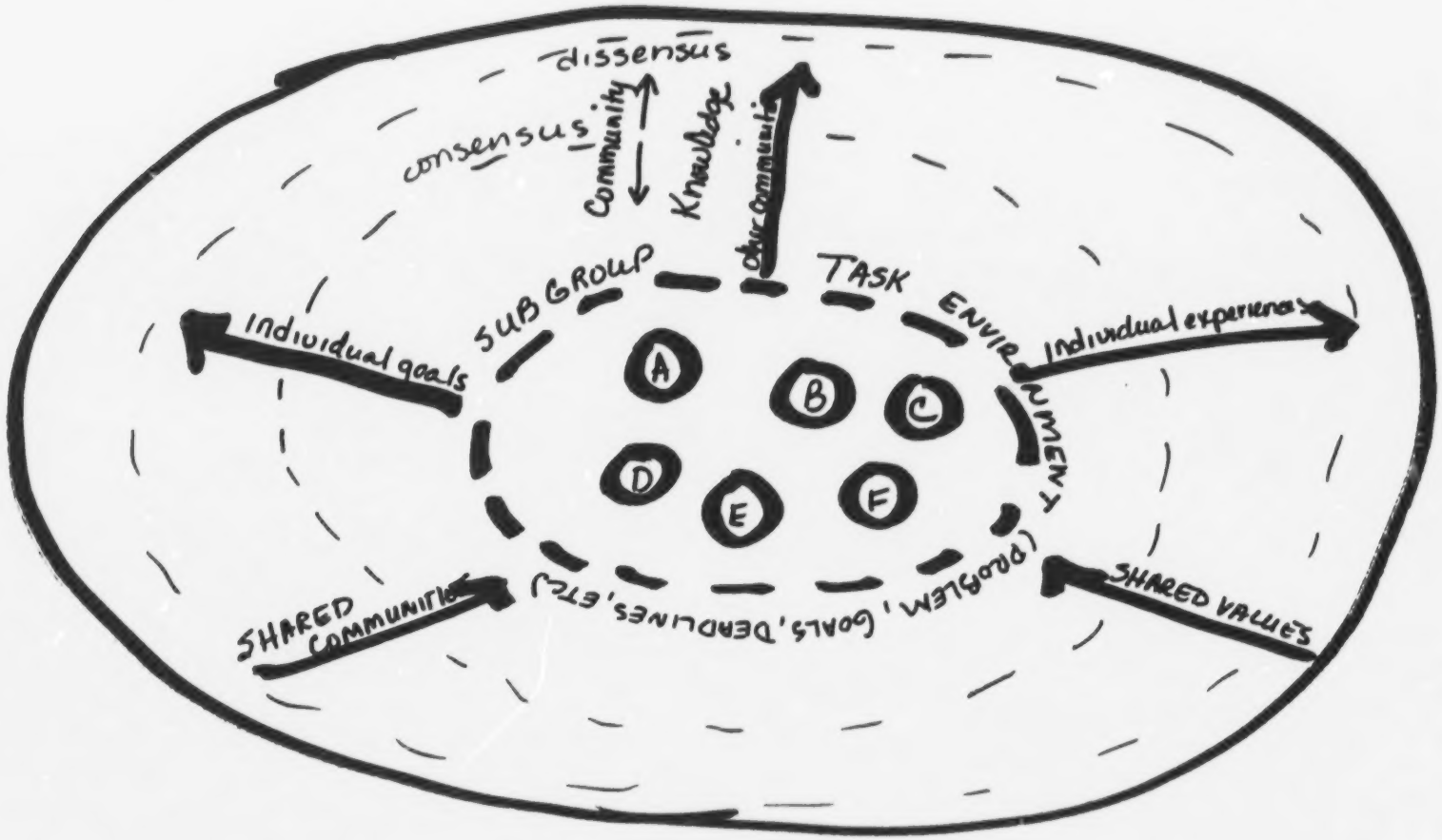
Knowledge and Community Processes



→ CONSENSUS FORCES

← DISSENSUS FORCES

J. Gibson '91

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